

FAMILY CAREGIVERS need a helping hand, too

Recently, we wrote about caregivers who work in the different settings in which older or disabled people need help, and we talked about Community Links, the program that encourages people to enter this worthwhile field. But we must not forget the family members who, out of love and a sense of family duty, assume the care of those who need assistance.

According to a 1997 National Alliance for Caregiving/AARP survey, nearly one in four U.S. households is involved in family caregiving. More than seven million persons are informal caregivers providing unpaid help to older persons who live in the community. These caregivers include spouses, adult children, other relatives and friends or neighbors.

Of the older persons receiving paid and unpaid assistance, 95% have family and friends involved in their care. The government estimates that if the work of informal caregivers had to be replaced by paid staff, the cost would be over \$150 billion per year.

As we live longer, our needs change. Medical advances have made it possible for persons with many chronic conditions, such as heart disease, strokes, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis, to live longer. While in the past the caregiver was most often an adult daughter, today it is often a spouse or sibling who is also an older adult. This change has come about as more women are in the workforce and are having their own children at a later age. >

It has been found, that in families in which a married daughter works, has children, and also cares for an aging parent, she is likely to spend more time caring for her aging parent than for her child.

As an important part of the health care team, all family care-givers face an immense challenge of conflicting demands: taking care of the older person and the rest of their family, especially young children. What may be the most difficult challenge is taking care of themselves, seeing to their own physical and emotional needs, and finding community services. Because of multiple responsibilities, conflicts of time, and the resulting emotional drain, caregivers have a high rate of depression; many describe their own health as fair to poor.

All caregivers need:

- Information on available community services;
- Help in getting these services;
- Individual counseling or caregiver training to help families identify and solve problems related to their caregiving roles;
- Respite care to enable families and other informal caregivers to get temporary relief, either at home or through adult day services.

For information about services, call your county aging unit or aging resource center (in the phonebook under county government or. aging). Ask about respite adult day care and caregiver training programs that offer information on identifying and reducing personal stress and that also teach how to communicate effectively in difficult situations.